

June 23, 2009

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NATIONAL SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE

Chairman Tierney's Remarks at the NIAC Conference
"U.S. and Iran: Between Elections & Enrichment"

WASHINGTON, DC — Last week, Congressman John F. Tierney (D-MA), Chairman of the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs delivered the following remarks at the National Iranian American Council's Congressional Conference.

A copy of Chairman Tierney's opening statement as prepared for delivery is below.

Chairman John F. Tierney
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives

Remarks at the NIAC Conference
"U.S. and Iran: Between Elections & Enrichment"

Wednesday, June 17, 2009
CVC Congressional Auditorium

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Trita and all of the other event organizers, for inviting me here today. It's a privilege to be a part of this event and to share the podium with my esteemed colleagues from the House as well as some of the foremost experts on Iran.

The period surrounding the Iranian presidential elections is an interesting time to hold an event like this. We have known since well before the Iranian election that their system created problems for believers in absolute democracy. We knew that the Guardian Council blocked numerous candidates from even getting their names on the ballot. We knew that journalists and even bloggers and people using Twitter and email were being obstructed from sharing their views and information.

So it is difficult for us to know exactly what Iranians want. Different polls give widely ranging accounts of attitudes and supposed vote preferences.

But we certainly know that there are a large number of Iranian people dissatisfied with the result and the process, and that very questionable actions occurred warranting serious skepticism at the very least. It is an ugly situation that leaves America and President Obama with a dilemma. He has rightfully in my view, invited Iran's rulers, whoever they may be, to enter into a dialogue.

The Administration has indicated it will continue on the path to negotiation with Iran's government. It is Iran's pursuit of fissile material needed for nuclear weapons that makes the stakes so high and leads President Obama to keep his offer to negotiate with Iran on the table with whoever is declared the winner of the election there.

Vice President Joe Biden stated the Administration's realist position Sunday, saying, "Our interests are the same before the election as after the election, and that is: We want them to cease and desist from seeking a nuclear weapon and having one in its possession, and

secondly to stop supporting terror.”

As one writer recently put it, “the hard part of this stance is that it leaves the people of Iran to their own devices. They have been railing against dictatorship from their rooftops. They voted against Ahmadinejad, among other reasons, because they want an end to hostile relations with America and much of the outside world.” That is, a concerted number obviously voted against Ahmadinejad, and we can fairly assume that an openness to dialogue with America is one of their reasons.

The President, as that same writer noted, “is doing what is right for American interests. If his overture to Iran leads to fruitful negotiations, the people of Iran will stand to benefit. And we hope their current resistance to unaccountable power may help bend the regime toward an accommodation with the rest of the world.”

Nevertheless, Iranians should hear from the United States and the West.

The credible desire to pursue a negotiated resolution of outstanding issues should not prohibit the Iranian people from hearing that there is a legitimate concern for what transpired in their election. We can still, as another suggested, “engage the Iranian government and tell President Ahmadinejad that if he is confident he won these elections he can benefit enormously by opening his country to a team of international observers to certify the results.” We could add that “the Iranian government | should permit free media and respect the free flow of information and ideas. And | we should insist to Tehran that the authorities refrain from using violence against peaceful protesters.”

If the international community can get Iran’s attention on these issues, we may get closer to knowing what a majority of Iranians really want. I, for one, do believe that the clear majority of rational and informed Iranian citizens really want engagement with the United States and a resolution of those matters now separating the West and current Iranian leaders.

The bravery and energy of the opposition movement – in the face of repression – shows that to be the case and is a true inspiration to us all. The spirit of democracy remains strong among Iranians.

Regardless of who Iran's next President is, the United States has a logical and compelling rationale to engage Iran. And, in my view, further engagement with the West is in Iran's best interests as well.

We start with the principle that our position on U.S.-Iranian relations is such that as a threshold matter, we need to pursue a posture vis-à-vis Iran that serves U.S. national security interests. Vital U.S.-Iranian issues can be better assessed from our perspective if we reach out to improve our understanding of Iranian motivations and aspirations buttressed by solid on-the-ground facts and realities. The same holds true for Iranian perspectives toward the West.

President Obama noted in his Cairo speech that both the United States and Iran have made mistakes in our past dealings, and that there is a, quote, "tumultuous history between us." He went on to stress a U.S. desire to turn the page and said, quote: "The question now is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build; we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect."

Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei reacted favorably to the President's speech by saying, quote, "should you change, our behavior will change, too." Many experts believe this was a sincere signal of Iran's openness to substantive diplomatic proposals.

The effect of the recent election results on this signal remains to be seen. Will the opposition's insistence "bend" him in this direction, or will an Ahmadinejad victory harden him against engagement?

Particularly if it is the former, the United States needs to build on this opening with concrete follow-on actions.

I don't have to recount to this audience what is at stake. At the forefront is the appropriate U.S. response to Iranian nuclear development. Additionally, Iran continues to play a key role in regional affairs, such as in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the broader Middle East. As a result, we need to encourage Iran to be a responsible and constructive stakeholder.

The President's actions, or more specifically his words, so far have been eloquent but, I contend, not bold or clear enough to evoke the kind of engagement necessary to prompt meaningful change in the current stand-off.

Reaching out sincerely will not alone be enough to overcome 30 years of suspicions and memories.

We should remember that there have been instances in the recent past, most notably immediately after 9/11, when Iran and the United States worked closely against common challenges. Testimony before our House Oversight Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs recounted episodes of cooperation in the deportation of al Qaeda and Taliban operatives hiding in Iran and assistance in negotiations to establish an Afghanistan government, as well as overtures for a broad dialogue focused on discussing a list of differences. It was this country's leaders who stifled those openings, not Tehran's.

Some experts, like Flynt Leverett, point out that Iranian foreign policy is deeply rooted in a consensus on national security held by the elite and backed by Iranian public opinion. Iran has 15 states on its borders, none of which is friendly. Iran has no strategic depth and only modest conventional military capabilities. In short, it lives in a dangerous (to it) neighborhood and has limited running-room to project national power.

As a consequence, Iranian elites have developed a national security doctrine that emphasizes two things: First, Iran has committed to developing asymmetric military capabilities, such as support for proxy armies like Hezbollah. Connecting with proxy actors in Lebanon and Gaza ensures that neither will become platforms opposed to Iranian interests.

Iran's nuclear ambitions cannot be taken lightly. Even as its leaders profess a desire for peaceful non-weaponized development, real concerns arise from reports that its conduct can be interpreted to allow for another less benign use of materials and missile technology being produced. Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair recently re-confirmed the December 2007 assessment that Iran shut down its covert nuclear enrichment and weaponization activities in fall 2003, with no evidence of a re-start.

However, the IAEA said in its quarterly June 5 report that the pace of enrichment and the installation of new centrifuges is accelerating at Natanz. The total number of installed centrifuges has increased by 30 percent since February of this year.

Additionally, Iran has demonstrated a serious interest in developing ballistic missiles to strengthen its role as a regional power and to counter Western influence in the region. Last month, Iran tested a sophisticated missile capable of striking Israel and parts of Western Europe. It can be moved or hidden relatively easily, uses solid fuel which can be stored in mountains, and can be fired on shorter notice, making it harder for Israel and other nations to target. Of course, the ambiguity surrounding Iran's nuclear program also provides a significant deterrent.

The report also noted that Iran is refusing not only to let inspectors visit a heavy-water reactor under construction, but also refusing to let them verify design information about the project. If the Iranians don't cooperate, the IAEA concluded that the agency, quote, "will not be in a position to provide credible assurance" about nuclear materials and activities.

And Iran has real interests and involvement in the Middle East, Gulf and Afghanistan and Pakistan regions.

Some would argue that these facts lead to an inescapable conclusion that Iran exhibits irrational security postures and poses a violent threat that will never be resolved.

From some Iranian perspectives, though, these views can be seen as rational, albeit to us counterproductive, strategies. Both aspects of Iran's national security doctrine – asymmetric warfare and muscular weapons systems – can seem offensive and threatening but can also be seen as fundamental and logical defenses from the perspective of an Iranian realist.

Any potential outcome of this election in all likelihood would not change the basic tenets of such a national security doctrine. In trying to assess whether any plausible case for reaching out can be made, it is helpful to explore how the average Iranian views the United States.

A recent poll finds that Iranians are open to the possibility of strategic rapprochement, particularly with the United States, as a means to address its core foreign policy and national security interests. Almost 70% of those polled support working with the United States to help resolve the Iraq war. The Iranian people overwhelmingly favor nuclear energy, and a majority favor nuclear weapons. However, 7 in 10 would trade weapons for full and normal trade and recognition.

Furthermore, a recent poll shows that 64% of the Iranian people support Iran's aid to Hamas, and those are spread over every income group. However, the poll also shows Iranians making a clear distinction between the U.S. and Israeli governments and the U.S. and Israeli people. They see their greatest threats as Israel and the United States but also see the United States at their greatest potential ally.

The Iranian people's top three priorities, according to the poll, are improving the economy, holding free elections, and ensuring a free press. They have a hunger for a normal democratic system, regardless of who they support in the elections, and for Western investment and humanitarian assistance. The ongoing demonstrations in Iran are palpable evidence that such hunger must be sated, and should bring a realization to Americans that not all Iranians – in fact probably far from any majority of Iranians – subscribe blindly to the threatening and violent protestations heard from some Iranian political figures from time to time.

So how can we reconcile these seemingly confusing attitudes? Certainly fostering a better understanding between governments and peoples would be a good start. Overtures to restart a diplomatic presence in each country would give us a window into the intentions and credibility of Iranian positions. Expansion of exchanges between diplomats, parliamentarians, educational, health and other cultural groups could be helpful.

But just as we have skeptics here in the West, Iran has more than its share – and given the history of belligerency even in the aftermath of post-9/11 cooperation it cannot be seen as entirely unreasonable. All of the concerns noted above are real. Yet if we are to expect a truly serious engagement, the President may be well advised to examine his current path.

I find myself in sympathy with those who contend that an arbitrary deadline such as “by the end of the year” may be counterproductive and undercut our credibility in negotiations. Everyone is painfully aware that time is of utmost importance and talks cannot be used as an excuse to delay until development of a nuclear threat is achieved. We cannot ignore the reality that eight years of threats and name calling passed while Iran made considerable progress in uranium enrichment. That approach has been tried without success. We can have negotiations without arbitrary deadlines because everyone is aware they cannot be endlessly prolonged.

Similarly, I find myself recognizing as reasonable the position that so long as the United States and western allies harbor the notion of destabilizing the Islamic Republic or seeking “regime change” it is unlikely that there would be incentive for Iran to engage meaningfully. Nor,

hopefully, would our government follow a path, nor intimate it would indulge a posture of engagement, only with actual intentions to lay the groundwork for eventually garnering international support for more aggressive coercive tactics.

Everyone knows the options available should negotiations not take place or fail. There is little benefit in being disingenuous about them.

Last month in Prague, the President said he would, quote, “support Iran’s right to peaceful nuclear energy with rigorous inspections” if it proves it is no longer a nuclear threat. “This is not simply about America’s interests,” he said. “It is also about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path.”

That is a start toward addressing the issue. The United States also needs to engage with Russia, China, and others as we confront the threat of an Iranian nuclear challenge. President Obama has mentioned common sourcing of nuclear material as a possible stabilizing option. That can be explored.

We should also look to engage with Iran on issues of mutual strategic interest, beginning with Afghanistan and Iraq. In May, Iran hosted a three-way summit with Pakistan and Afghanistan where the three countries committed to work together to fight Islamic extremism and stop drug smuggling across their borders. We should welcome such third-party developments and look for appropriate opportunities to engage directly. A similar area of potential cooperation exists in Iraq.

A May RAND report recommends that U.S. strategy acknowledge Iran’s role as an influential, but not omnipotent, player in the Middle East, and work to exploit existing barriers to Iran’s harmful activities while simultaneously seeking areas of engagement. Specifically, the RAND report recommends four things:

First, apply increased multilateral pressure on Iran’s nuclear ambitions while deescalating unilateral U.S. pressure on Iran;

Second, pursue bilateral U.S.-Iranian dialogues in areas of common interest, such as stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, narcotics trafficking, and humanitarian crises;

Third, issue unambiguous statements about U.S. interests and intentions in the region; and

Finally, engage in efforts to build a cooperative, multilateral regional security framework that is simultaneously inclusive of Iran and sensitive to the needs of U.S. friends and allies in the region.

To fix our Iran policy, the President could commit to not use force to change the borders or the form of government of the Islamic Republic and work with Tehran to convert the Hamas and Hezbollah factions' aspirations into pursuing political, not violent resolutions of the Middle East's core political conflicts.

These are but ideas at this stage, but ideas worthy of consideration.

From the Iranian perspective, a recent poll revealed four actions the United States could take to improve their opinion of the United States: first, sign a free trade treaty; second, withdraw troops from Iraq; third, re-open the U.S. Embassy in Tehran; and fourth, issue more visas for Iranians to work and study in the United States.

Some of these actions are an admittedly heavy lift in today's political climate, but we have used all manner of strategic and diplomatic tools in the past with great success against adversarial governments.

None of us approaches this situation lightly or naively. We have grave concerns and limited time in which to address them. We should have a dramatic appreciation for the consequences of forcing matters to a point where only coercion and violence are left as recourse. That would serve no one's interests.

Our intentions must be clearly stated and our resolve firm. Just as that is so, so must we be genuine in any effort to seek a negotiated solution and sincere in our appreciation for the interests of the majority of Americans and Iranians – their mutual aspirations for a peaceful resolution, for the straightforward desire to live in peace and have a decent quality of life unthreatened by external forces and with freedom and liberty.

The President's rhetoric has indicated that he appreciates these facts. He has the opportunity to show that he does and to present the Iranian government – whoever may be elected – with the need to show the world its true intentions.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today.